

# Ethics, Values, and Leadership

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## Introduction

Military leaders, at all levels of command, face ethical dilemmas, the best leaders recognize and face these dilemmas with a commitment to **doing what's right**, not just what is most convenient and expedient. This phrase, *doing what's right*, sounds deceptively simple, but sometimes it will take great moral courage to do what's **right**, even when the right course of actions seems clear. At other times, leaders face ethically complex issues that lack a simple black-and-white answer. Whichever the case, military leaders are charged with setting the moral example for their subordinates, an example which becomes the model for the entire group or organization, good or bad. Leaders who themselves do not honor integrity do not inspire it in others. Leaders who are mostly concerned with their own advancement do not inspire selflessness in others. The effective leader is the one who internalizes a strong set of ethical or moral values and principles.

## Study Assignment

Read the information section of this lesson.

Lesson Objective: Comprehend how society's ethical standards and values are interwoven into the concept of military ethics.

Sample of Behavior: In your own words, summarize the phrase "Doing what's right" as it pertains to the concept of military ethics.

## Information

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### Professional Military Ethics: An Attempt at Definition

Lt Col Kenneth H. Wenker

What is "professional military ethics?" A journal of professional military ethics ought to be able to address such a question. Yet for every ten people you poll you get ten different responses. For cynical persons military ethics is merely a public front put up to prop up civilian confidence so as to obtain funding. For another person military ethics is the rules of the game which we must follow, most of the time, if we are to "make it" in a military career. Still another will see military ethics as a matter of conforming oneself to the immutable laws of the universe, at least insofar as those laws might apply to the military setting.

Most of the time we don't need to worry about such issues. We get along fine with conventional rules. Don't lie! Keep your promises! Follow orders! These and similar precepts serve us well in most situations no matter what our more fundamental concept of professional ethics might be. Whether one views ethics as doing what's necessary to get ahead or as complying with the immutable laws of the universe, lying turns out to be a bad practice. We say we ought to avoid lying and we agree with that practice even if we disagree on what it means or why it's true. The generally accepted rules of conduct such as not cheating or stealing serve us in most situations. And so we preach them as the basic foundation of social, not just military, conduct. We drill them into our recruits; we emphasize them in our professional military education programs.

It would be great if we could get along all the time with a code of ethics based only on simple rules of conduct. Unfortunately, such an ethics, while sufficient most of the time, is too shallow for many of the more complex issues military professionals often face. Sometimes ethics does demand that we lie, break a promise, disobey a legal order, or even kill a human being. The principal reason justifying this conduct is that more fundamental ethical values are at stake, values such as freedom, or individual rights, or human dignity, or national self-preservation. Sometimes, in order to preserve our fundamental ethical values, we must act contrary to the immediate rules, which are normally acceptable as guides for social behavior. Thus, for example, we would probably break some promises in order to save a life, or we would injure or otherwise use force against someone about to steal valuable property from another person or from ourselves, and we would go to war to protect wholesale violations of the rights of the American or free world citizenry, as the American military has done several times in this century.

The complications which such actions involve in terms of our basic ethical codes and values are hard for some people to understand and accept. Like all of us, they learned ethical behavior by having rigidly defined rules of behavior drilled into them by parents, teachers, and clergymen whom they highly respect. Having learned such rules well, they consider absolute obedience to such rules the total extent of their ethical obligations. In such cases one of two understandable attitudes often results. Either the rules are tenaciously held to, as though they could solve all ethical problems while ignoring or burying conflicting ethical demands, or once the individual sees that sometimes one must act contrary to such rules, the rules themselves are seen as invalid and are often jettisoned. This latter situation really amounts to the abandonment of any ethical commitment whatsoever. The effect of an excessive identification of ethics with rigidly defined rules is either a lack of ethical sensitivity or the abandonment of the ethical in favor of the prudential.

The real problems which one must deal with then, when attempting to define what professional military ethics involves or consists of, is to find a way to explain what professional ethics might be without reducing it to a set of rigid, simplistic rules. At the same time we need to do so in a way that can serve as a foundation for a set of *immediate rules*, which provide ethical guidance for most situations. In other words, ethics is not merely a set of rules, but it does provide a foundation for those rules.

This paper contains three basic contentions. First, I suggest that the fundamental commitment of the mature American soldier should be to the most basic

values we are supposed to be protecting, such values as individual freedom, personal rights, equality of opportunity, and human dignity. Second, I argue that such a commitment will generate two kinds of ethical obligations, those which are important in themselves and those which are important as means. Third, I discuss how these two kinds of obligations are related, and I draw certain implications concerning the personal character required of men and women functioning in a modern American armed forces.

## A.

On the surface the armed forces would not appear to be a very noble institution. By definition it must be prepared, as an institution, to wage war with all the killing, wounding, and destruction associated with that human calamity. This would seem, at first, to be not much different in behavior from the actions of an overgrown but legalized gang of criminals.

One's initial response to such a suggestion or analogy might be to point out that criminals work against society and for the good of themselves, whereas the armed forces work for society frequently at the expense of the well-being of its members. The armed forces, according to this suggestion, gains nobility from the self-sacrificing nature of its enterprise.

While this suggestion points us in the right direction, it doesn't go far enough. The ideal of self-sacrifice falls short as a justification for military conduct because self-sacrifice, of itself, has very little if anything to recommend it. Self-sacrifice is a praiseworthy thing only if that for which one is sacrificing oneself is of value. Societies, as such, aren't work sacrifice, because some of them are good and some are not. A society is worth sacrifice only if the values of that society have a strong moral foundation. Where an army has no real function except to keep the current group of political thugs in power, the self-sacrifice of the soldiers has no value. In fact, it is probably wrong. The activity of the soldier gets its worth not because it supports a society but because it supports a *good* society, one committed to basic human values.

What these basic values are or ought to be, of course, is the subject of apparently never-ending debate. In our own case, our nation's fundamental values, such as belief in the dignity and equality of individual persons, the freedom from unnecessary political restraints or pressures, or basic human rights are considered the source of our society's worth. While American society is surely not perfect, we believe that our basic values are important and worth defending. They alone give meaning and justification to the activity of an American armed forces.

Such fundamental values must not be looked at primarily as a more basic set of rules. Then we only end up with possible conflicts between these more basic rules and thus must search even deeper for still more fundamental rules. We get nowhere. Rather, our fundamental values reflect more of an attitude or outlook than a set of rules. They determine the perspective with which we view the world. We "see" the world in such a way that we are aware of the essential equality of all human beings; we see all individual human beings as possessing dignity; we recognize the essential

moral autonomy of individuals; we are conscious of and affirm the rights that flow from such human characteristics.

There is something deficient about someone who enters the armed forces exclusively for his or her own benefit. Such persons are usually not blameworthy or guilty; they are usually not aware of the moral implications of their actions and overlook such implications because of the generally accepted and unquestioning social approval of service in the armed forces. To enter into an organization whose primary purpose is to be prepared for and to fight wars – with the attendant killing, wounding, and destroying inherent in that occupation – and to do so *exclusively* for self gain amounts to participating in activity which is normally considered immoral behavior without realizing that higher moral commitments alone justify one's behavior. We need to be aware that membership in the armed forces is not a morally neutral situation. It must be justified. And in our case we consider it to be justified by the moral need to protect human rights. In effect, we do not enter the armed forces to kill or destroy; we enter to preserve and protect human rights. Our moral concern for human rights is what makes moral sense out of our participation in the armed forces.

Of course this commitment to basic values is rarely what prompts one to join the armed services. Most join out of economic motivation, the pressure of the draft, the opportunity for education and the like. And yet most such persons, at least subconsciously, realize that they wouldn't consider it right to "enlist" in a criminal syndicate for similar reasons. They somehow recognize that the one is wrong and the other is right. And, I believe, if they are encouraged and helped in figuring out why they accept the one and not the other, they will come to recognize their basic value commitments, which permit involvement in activity, which would be normally wrong. Indeed, they will come to realize that these commitments are quite strong, strong enough to override the normal prohibition against activity involving homicide and destruction. To repeat, most persons are not aware of their basic value commitments when they enter the armed service; however, up reflection, they will usually find very strong commitments. These commitments can serve as the ground, the starting point, of a viable "professional military ethics."

## **B.**

Professional military ethics from this perspective can be seen as the obligations that a member of the armed forces has, which arise from or are generated by the fundamental value commitments, which justify his or her participation in the armed forces in the first place. These obligations arise in two totally separate ways.

The first way is by direct derivation from the fundamental values. If we are to claim that the role of the armed forces is to protect such values as human liberties, human autonomy, human dignity, the essential equality of humans, and the equal rights that humans possess, then there are obligations of personal behavior which demand that we act according to these values. It makes no sense for a person to belong to the armed forces, which are committed to protecting the dignity of humans, if he or she isn't concerned about treating other human beings with dignity in the first place. A consistent military ethics demands that we treat humans, including ourselves and our subordinates, with respect, that we recognize their essential equality, and that we respect their basic human rights. To break our promises to others, to steal their property, to cheat in order to take unfair advantage of others, to treat humans as mere objects in our pursuit of economic, sexual, or psychological goals, to mistreat our own selves with drugs, including excessive alcohol, to lie; all of these kinds of actions and many others are inconsistent with the most fundamental values we are committed to protect. As such, these prohibitions of certain types of behavior become part of the military ethic.

There is a second kind of ethical obligation that grows out of our fundamental values. These obligations arise because they are necessary as means to the end of protecting these more fundamental values. An obvious example is military obedience. This is an ethical obligation because it is necessary for an effective military force, which in turn is necessary to protect fundamental human values. Other actions that are important as a means of securing basic values include those which promote discipline, orderliness, subordination of individual desires to group necessities, personal integrity and reliability, and commitment to excellence.

## **C.**

Finally, I wish to consider the relationship between obligations that are derived from our fundamental values and those that are needed as means to preserve those fundamental values. First, it should be fairly obvious that the two kinds of obligations, ethical obligations derived from fundamental values and obligations incurred in pursuing the defense of ideals, can conflict. For example, the need to obey orders and subordinate one's own needs to group needs conflicts with the value we place on personal freedom. For another example, the need to train new service members in the values of discipline and order (as in basic training) can conflict with the ethical demand to respect the dignity and equality of each individual. Still another example is the conflict between the ethical need for military efficiency and the need to respect the rights of civilians who happen to be in an area of operations.

Unfortunately, there are no rules telling us how to go about resolving such conflicts in every circumstance. In some of the more common or more crucial

situations we have various policy statements, regulations, conventions, or laws to help guide our decisions. But often these are only guides, and even more often the most difficult cases don't seem to be covered by any policies, rules, conventions, or laws. In such cases we have to consider the extent to which the rights, dignity, and freedom of human beings are being violated, the importance of the objective, the necessity of the means in attaining that objective, and many other factors. Because there are no rules to help make such decisions, military ethics demands that we cultivate more than a commitment to mere ethical rules. We need to cultivate our sense of commitment to the fundamental values on which those rules depend. The ethical conflicts generated by membership in the armed forces are so complex that they cannot be resolved except by relying on the ethical sensitivity of mature individuals. We need to cultivate that sensitivity by reflecting on, and diligently committing ourselves to, our fundamental values.

It should be equally obvious that the two kinds of obligations do not always conflict. Most of the time they demand the same kind of action. For example, honesty, integrity, and reliability are demanded both because they are the necessary means to military efficiency and because they are demanded more directly by our fundamental value commitments. Sometimes someone will ask, "What difference does it make if I tell this relatively insignificant lie this one time? It doesn't turn me into an ethical monster. It doesn't destroy or even harm military effectiveness." The answer is to point out that honesty is not only valuable as a means to further military effectiveness, it is also demanded by the basic values which justify the existence of the armed forces in the first place.

I want to make one final point: given a mature perspective on military ethics, it is impossible to accept the idea of professional military ethics as a standard governing duty hours and military activities only. This is because military ethics does not arise merely from involvement in the armed forces. Military ethics also arises directly from the values which justify the armed forces in the first place. Ultimately even those character traits of special importance to the armed forces such as discipline and obedience derive their ethical force from our concern for basic human values.

If a fundamental element of an American serviceman's duty is a responsibility to act in accordance with basic values, then perhaps at no other institution in the Air Force is it as important to help define those values as at the United States Air Force Academy. For the mission of this institution is to prepare future leaders of the Air Force and to prepare them for the moral conflicts they inevitably will confront. The success of any institution rests on the character and leadership of its personnel. If we cannot teach rules that will guide behavior in all possible circumstances, we can at least teach the ideal that the function of a professional American military officer is to provide a leadership that chooses, when confronted with ethical conflict, on the side of basic American values rather than on the side of expedience or mere reflex response to orders.

## **Conclusion**

Values are constructs representing the general set of behaviors individuals consider important, and they play a central part in a leader's psychological makeup. Values are a key component of the moral-reasoning process, which is the process

people use to resolve moral or ethical dilemmas. This is important since leaders undoubtedly will face a variety of ethical dilemmas during their careers. In his book, On Leadership, John Gardner stresses the centrality and importance of the moral dimension of leadership. He states leaders ultimately must be judged on the basis of a framework of values, not just in terms of effectiveness, and argues that leaders should always treat others as ends in themselves, not as objects or mere means to the leader's ends.

#### Bibliography:

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2. Hughes, Richard L., Ginnett, Robert , Curphy, Gordon, Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience, Irwin McGraw-Hill., Boston, MA, 1999. Chapter 7.



## **LIEUTENANT COLONEL ADDISON EARL BAKER**

led his B-24 bomber group on an extremely hazardous low-level attack against enemy oil refineries at Ploesti, Rumania, 1 August 1943. Approaching the target, his B-24 was seriously damaged and set afire. Although flying over terrain suitable for landing, he refused to jeopardize the mission of the group and battled his way to the target, bombing it with devastating effect. Only then did he leave formation, avoiding other aircraft with superb airmanship; but his valiant attempts to gain sufficient altitude for the crew to bail out were unavailing. Colonel Baker and his crew were killed when the flaming aircraft crashed.